

Marion's veteran teachers say new pay plan falls short

By Joe Callahan

Posted Jun 25, 2020 at 3:58 PM

Mark Avery, the local teacher union president, says while teachers appreciate getting raises, veteran educators feel slighted.

Cheryl Lindstrom launched her teaching career at Belleview Middle School nearly 25 years ago. She taught sixth-grade writing, health and reading and was paid \$20,100 annually.

Flash forward to 2020. Lindstrom, 66, is still at Belleview Middle and now teaches world history, U.S. history and civics. Her base salary has climbed to about \$53,500.

A new bill signed by Gov. Ron DeSantis on Wednesday will eventually boost minimum salaries of teachers statewide to \$47,500. The state will pump \$600 million to raise Florida teacher salaries in 2020-21 to No. 5 nationally.

Because of the mandate, Lindstrom's base salary will soon be only a few thousand dollars more than that of a starting teacher, despite the fact she has 25 years of experience.

Marion County's starting teacher salary in 2019-20 was \$39,050, while the average salary of a Marion teacher is \$46,351, or \$1,149 less than DeSantis' new mandate. The district has 3,000 teachers at 50-plus schools throughout Marion County, which is larger than Rhode Island.

Mark Avery, president of the Marion Education Association, the local teacher's union, said DeSantis' goal is to boost the pay of all teachers to at least \$47,500.

The state will pump \$500 million to raise starting salaries statewide and will add \$100 million more to boost veteran teacher pay. As a result, newer teachers will see the biggest pay raises.

The best guess right now is that Marion will get \$7.2 million of that state funding, with only \$1.44 million earmarked by the state for the most veteran teachers. The money cannot be used to pay administrative or non-teacher salaries.

"That (\$47,500) is the goal," Avery said of the higher starting salary. "But there is not enough state funding, so this year the number looks more like \$45,000 (in Marion) will be the highest we can get to."

Kevin Christian, school district spokesman, said the salaries will likely not be paid until October, once the district knows how many teachers the district will need in the classroom. He said, however, the raises will be paid retroactive to July 1.

While higher teacher pay is a good for all teachers in the long run, some officials and teachers say it does leave a bad taste in the mouths of veteran educators.

“I think what is bad is that a teacher on one side of the hallway may get say a \$3,000 (up to \$6,000) pay increase and the teacher across the hallway may only get a \$300 pay increase,” Avery noted. “It is still more money for teachers, that is true. But it will cause some animosity among teachers. There will only be a little bit of difference between veteran teachers and younger teachers.”

Vickie Treulieb, a Forest High School teacher, said higher starting pay is a great recruiting tool, “but we need retention just as much, if not more.”

“Many teachers quit within the first five years,” she noted. “Those of us that have been teaching for years deserve a reward, too. This will sadly anger teachers who have been in the field for a while and possibly cause them to leave the profession.”

The salary divide may push veterans out of the profession, which would be “sad because students will lose out on quality teachers who know how to teach ... the first year is so hard for everyone.”

Julie Sheppard Smith, who works at Ward-Highlands Elementary School, agrees. Her starting salary in 1998 was \$24,000 and now her salary is “barely in the 50s.”

“It is a slap in the face for those of us who stick through the nonsense,” Smith said.

Superintendent of Schools Heidi Maier said the higher pay will help school districts “attract new teachers.” Though she is a firm supporter of DeSantis, Maier said that the salary increase maybe should have gone to veteran educators.

“I think it would have been better spent there to retain teachers with a skillset because, in turn, they can mentor these new ones (teachers). It is a Catch-22 because there is only so much money.”

Meanwhile, the school district still does not have its final budget from the state. DeSantis must sign the budget by June 30 and then district will find out how much, if any, school funding is cut due the COVID-19 pandemic.

Christian said that school officials also fear that the state will not continue funding the pay increases during the years to follow. Because it is a raise, not a bonus, the expense is recurring year after year.

“So our concern as a district is that, at some point in the future, the Legislature does not fund it,” said Christian, meaning district would have to start using per-pupil funding to pay those pay increases. “At some point it could become a district expense.”

Avery said that the plan is good for teachers, especially in the future. In the short term, veteran teachers feel like they are not valued.

“It is still more money for teachers,” said Avery, adding the move may be deemed unfair by veteran teachers.

Contact Joe Callahan at 867-4113 or at joe.callahan@starbanner.com. Follow him on Twitter [@JoeOcalaNews](https://twitter.com/JoeOcalaNews).

